Breeding Bird Atlas

As I thought about what I would discuss in this, my last President’s Statement, my mind was so overloaded with potential topics that I had difficulty concentrating on the task at hand. I finally decided that since my life has been consumed off-and-on for more than a decade with the Wisconsin Breeding Bird Atlas project, this should be my focus.

When a few of us started to discuss the possibilities of doing an Atlas for Wisconsin, I can remember vividly the looks that I received when I declared that we were embarking on a journey that would last at least a decade—yes, 10 years! Well, it already has been more than 10 years since these first discussions, and we aren’t finished, but the end is in sight. By the time you read this, the completed manuscript will be in the hands of the publisher, University of Wisconsin Press.

One of the fortunate aspects about the project is that because of the development of the world wide web, we’ve been able to develop a robust web site to present information about Atlas results before the book is published. I hope that all of you, even if you don’t care about Atlas results or the data, have taken the opportunity to view the wonderful image library and listen to some of the recordings in the audio library. Please take a look and see for yourself what is available for you to enjoy <http://www.uwgb.edu/birds/wbba/index.htm>.

One of the first Atlas tasks that I performed was to develop a slide show about the Atlas. During a recent program I presented to the Schlitz Audubon Nature Center Bird Club, I repeated the 11 objectives of the Atlas that we had set forth and then reviewed how well we had done in meeting them. I thought I would do the same here.

1. Survey the state systematically—Done. When the coverage for 1,132 quads (1,041 priority blocks) is viewed, Wisconsin birders did a terrific job, helped immensely by the paid atlasers who tackled some of the state’s toughest to reach bird locations.

2. Organize data into species distribution maps—Done. Just take a look at the web site for this information, which also will be featured in the book.

3. Classify breeding evidence—Done. Tables showing breeding status and the number of records with extreme/median dates for breeding behavior will appear in the book.

4. Learn about abundance and nesting phenology—Done. These data are discussed in the book’s species accounts; phenology dates are in a table.
5. Provide information on Threatened & Endangered species—Done. Obviously, breeding information on our state’s threatened and endangered bird species is especially critical to our knowledge base and to bird conservation.

6. Identify habitats supporting rare species—Done. Some of this information will be presented in species accounts; additional data can be gleaned from the actual records and comments.

7. Provide baseline data for future generations—Done. This objective is especially important in my opinion. One of the fascinating activities that readers of the Atlas book will be able to do is to compare the Atlas distribution maps with those in Sam Robbins’ Wisconsin Birdlife.

8. Provide a scientific reference having many applications—Done. Based on the number of requests we already have received to use Atlas data, this objective clearly has been met.

9. Introduce birders to a new way of birding—Done. To me, this is one of the more overlooked successes of the project. Hundreds of birders for the first time really concentrated on looking to see what an individual bird was doing, and they were looking in the summer time. Just how many people cheered, even if silently, when that adult, instead of swallowing that caterpillar, flew off with it in the direction of habitat suitable for a nest? Confirmed!

10. Provide a cooperative partnering atmosphere—Done. Bring together the Atlas Steering Committee, Regional Coordinators, authors, and photographers; the more than 1,600 observers who submitted records; and the many individuals, governmental agencies, foundations, businesses, and non-profit organizations who contributed funds; and you have one HUGE family that successfully pulled off the largest ornithological project in state history.

11. Provide information to compare with historical data—Done. This was accomplished primarily by the authors who prepared the book’s species accounts.

Well, by my accounting, the Atlas project receives a grade of 100%. However, I admit to being biased, so, please take a look at the Atlas web site and give the book a thorough review when it appears in your hands during 2005, and judge for yourselves. You are even allowed to start wondering and thinking about what the changes will be in Wisconsin’s breeding bird community when the results of the 2nd Wisconsin Breeding Bird Atlas are known.

President